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ABSTRACT

"In Search of Excellence," by Peters and Waterman identifies one characteristic of corporate excellence as "unusual effort on the part of apparently ordinary employees." The community college has many students who fit into the category of "ordinary people." Their academic performance can be maximized by recognizing their individual differences, and finding solutions to the problems of curriculum, instructional delivery, and specialized student services that currently prevent the needed customizing of education. Some of the new knowledge and technology being introduced into education offers potential for customizing education. The computer, when operating interactively with the student and an instructor, offers a breakthrough toward individualized instruction and should be one of the new technologies to be used as an aid in instructional delivery. Another important challenge facing community colleges is to prepare students for thier futures as lifelong learners. To do so, the colleges must: (1) demonstrate to students their capacity for learning and the lifelong benefits of the skill; (2) help students develop cognitive skills; (3) instill positive attitudes toward and a sense of personal responsibility for learning; and (4) continue to provide multiple learning options. However, the actions of community colleges are often at odds with what has been discovered about individual differences and learning theory; this is so because of the use of the university as a role model and the critical problems with group instruction. This cognitive dissonance must be resolved if community colleges are to be successful in their search for excellence. (LAL)

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IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE--FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE

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IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE--FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE

Reform is the big pendulum swing in education in the mid-80s. At last count, there were more than 30 books, studies, and commission reports, as well as 175 task groups spread throughout the nation, all devoted to improving the quality of education. In all of these commentaries, there really isn't much agreement on whether American education has a cold, the flu, or is about to die of pneumonia. However, I am sure that many of the symptoms are real, and I want to attempt a diagnosis that I think fits our current condition best.

Creating Winners

Peters and Waterman, in *In Search of Excellence*, describe the most successful corporations in America and how they got that way. Their criteria for excellence do not reside in the prestige of the product (remember that both MacDonald's and IBM are on their list) but rather in the attitude and enthusiasm of the workers. That conclusion doesn't surprise me much. But when they identify one characteristic of corporate excellence as "unusual effort on the part of *apparently ordinary* employees," I realize that we have a lot to think about in the community college situation--so many of our students fit into the category of *ordinary people*.

These authors suggest that excellent companies "turn the *average* Joe and the *average* Jane into winners," which, we well know, is much more difficult than just *recognizing* winners. We are good at identifying winning students. In fact, much of the educational reform movement currently underway is based upon selecting winners rather than upon creating them. Colleges that are able to select winners for their entering classes are perceived as quality institutions. Judging quality on the selectivity of the admissions process, rather than on "value added" to a person while he is in the institution, has created, in my opinion, an upside-down ranking of our higher education institutions with respect to excellence. Unfortunately, *making* winners out of ordinary students--one of our major functions in the open-door community college--is easily the toughest problem we have.

Peters and Waterman insist that most excellent companies build systems to reinforce *degrees of winning* rather than degrees of losing. The less-than-excellent organizations take a negative view of their workers. "They verbally berate participants for poor performance . . . . They design systems that seem calculated to tear down their workers' self-image." Pat Cross reminds us that of all the data she has collected on open-admissions students in community colleges, "none were more distressing than those showing students' perceptions of themselves as losers in the educational race." If we perceive that a large part of our job in community colleges is turning losers into winners, then some things seem imperative.

Recognizing Differences

We know it does no good to tell students that they are doing fine if they are not--and there is plenty of evidence that ordinary students are not doing well. In my more than three decades of trying to find realistic ways to provide education for all people, I have reached the same conclusion as Pat Cross: it is our commitment to the lock-step, time-defined structures of education that keeps so many ordinary students from becoming winners. Our traditional delivery system works well enough for those who are already winners, but it is simply unrealistic to expect all students to learn the same material, to the same standards of performance, in the same amount of time, taught by the same method. Despite our knowledge of the importance of individual differences, we still fail to provide the service that will substantially reduce high attrition. I strongly suspect that this is because it is beyond the energy level of most teachers to truly individualize instruction *in addition to* handling the required tasks of the traditional group instruction process. So, it seems, we continue to ignore the individual differences that do not fit into the time-bound, group instruction mold and try instead to reduce the diversity--as Pat Cross notes--"through selection, through narrowing curricular choices, and through proclaiming that we expect too much of our schools and that they must be allowed to get back to basics."

De-Massifying Education

If we choose to improve our institutions by getting rid of problem learners, it will be at the expense of society. The superficially excellent institution is something we simply can't afford. I propose instead that we maximize the performance of *all* of our "ordinary people" by seriously addressing their individual differences and

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proceed now to find solutions to the problems of curriculum, instructional delivery, and specialized student services that currently prevent the needed customizing. Ben Bloom, Jerome Bruner, and John Roueche, some of our most respected researchers, are convinced that almost any person can learn the basic curriculum, given enough time and appropriate help. If my, and their, diagnosis is correct, then it seems that educational reform should start questioning the ancient structures of education.

To use Alvin Toffler's phrase, it is time to de-massify education. In his *Third Wave*, he suggests that products and services in general will be customized. In education we seem generally oblivious to the potential power of much of the new technology to custom-design education. Despite these technological changes, most educational reform recommendations of the 1980s propose Second Wave solutions in a Third Wave world. They suggest re-massifying rather than de-massifying education.

Keys to Lifelong Learning

An adult's greatest handicaps are poor basic skills and a dislike of formal learning. On a recent *Firing Line* TV program, William Buckley and Mortimer Adler were arriving at their separate conclusions about the ability of the average student to deal with a core curriculum. Buckley asked if Adler had any proof that they could. "No," said Adler, "I do not have absolute proof, but I do have strong hopes. On the other hand, neither do you have absolute proof that they cannot learn. In our democratic society, I would rather we have an educational system designed around my hopes than around your doubts."

Those who dislike learning are doomed to be stuck in dead-end and even disappearing jobs, and those who like learning can use it to make their lives richer. As Pat Cross observes, "One thing that we know for sure from all the research on adult learning is that the already well-educated rush to take advantage of the new opportunities that are appearing; the poorly educated stay away in droves."

I believe that some of the new knowledge now being introduced into education offers us the opportunity to de-massify education--to customize it so that Adler's reason for hoping is greatly increased and Buckley's reason for doubting is greatly decreased. Bud Hodgkinson reminds us that most of higher education now have access to computers, but instructional programs within those institutions appear generally oblivious to the potential power of the computer to custom-design education. The computer, when operating interactively with the student and an instructor, offers a breakthrough toward individualizing and customizing that simply can no longer be neglected by those interested in academic excellence. And the computer is only one, though perhaps the most important, of the new technologies that we should be developing to aid in instructional delivery. I agree with John Roueche who says that the heart of every delivery system has to be a live instructor "to provide structure, set standards, and provide support." When instructors put the new technologies to work as additional teaching tools, the teacher's role will be enhanced--not diminished or eliminated.

At Stake: Survival of the Democratic Ideal in the Information Age

The most important challenge facing community colleges is to *prepare stuaents for their futures as lifelong learners*. Doing this, however, will not be an easy task, given the condition of education. Simply put, we must: (1) demonstrate to all students that they are capable of learning and that it is a useful, satisfying skill that will serve them well throughout their lives; (2) help them to develop the cognitive skills that serve as the basic tools for lifelong learning; (3) instill positive attitudes toward learning and put them in charge of their own learning; and (4) continue to provide the multiple options that a learning society can expect in its community colleges. The new technology isn't the answer to it all, but I do believe it is a key that will help to unlock the individual talents of those students who have not responded to time-bound group instruction. Sometime in the future when we finally have realized a highly individualized and customized delivery system, there will probably still be an irreducible number of students that we will not be able to turn into winners because of personal problems beyond our, and their, control. As educators, however, I know we do not want it to be the system we operate that causes losers. As community colleges continue their search for excellence, I think they will find it in their ability to deal with ordinary people, in turning losers into winners, in being hopeful rather than doubtful. We are the only segment of higher education capable and interested in serving all of our citizens, and we simply must find the ways and means of doing it if the democratic ideal is to survive in the information age.

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Suanne D. Roueche, Editor
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IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE--FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE
PART 2

Author's Note: I have received so many kind words about my earlier article (*Innovation Abstracts*, Volume VI, No. 22) that I wanted to give credit where credit is due. A much fuller and more elegant treatment of this thesis appears in a speech by Pat Cross entitled "The Impact of the 1980s on Developmental Education" (delivered at the Western College Reading and Learning Association Conference, April, 1984, and appearing in the November issue of the *Phi Delta Kappan*). I borrowed liberally from her comments. I also wished to share the conclusion of my longer speech from which the first article was taken.

Cognitive Dissonance in the Halls of Ivy

Cognitive dissonance is a term used to describe the findings of what many social scientists acknowledge to be the single most important experiment ever conducted in social psychology, the Fetsinger-Aronson experiment. Discrepancy between *what we do* and *what we believe in* results in what is known as "cognitive dissonance." The critical implication of dissonance theory is that people will rationalize in an attempt to make their attitudes match their behavior--*after the fact*. That our behavior determines our beliefs runs counter to what most of us firmly believe. I think this phenomenon lies at the heart of many of the most vexing problems faced by community college educators.

Our behavior is at odds with much of what we have discovered about individual differences and learning theory over the last fifty years. Cognitive dissonance has lulled us into believing our behavior is okay, even if we may have an occasional twinge about the quality of learning taking place. Our rationalizations leave us with little incentive to redirect our behavior into more productive channels. How is it that those of us in the Halls of Ivy have allowed ourselves to get into such a predicament? And is there a way out?

The University as Role Model

There are, no doubt, many contributing factors in an issue as complex as this one; but I believe there is one that has had more influence than all others combined--the use of the university as a role model for our instructional behavior. All of higher education tends to follow the lead of about a dozen "flagship" universities--especially in curriculum development and instructional methodology. The Stanfords, Harvards, and Berkeleys establish the norms from which the rest of higher education depart only with great difficulty. In my home state of California, UC Berkeley played an important role in helping local junior colleges get established, in helping them acquire legitimacy and status, in educating the faculty and administrators who operated them--and in becoming our role model for curriculum and instructional methodology. None of this was ever forced on us; in fact, we were very grateful. At the time, hardly anyone questioned this influence; questions about what we were doing, or why, haven't been seriously addressed by many over the intervening years.

I am not critical of our responses to UC's direction during our early developmental years because we were dealing primarily with young high school graduates who were mostly BA-bound. Neither am I critical of UC's practices, *then or now*. The University, then and now, selects from among the best learners our high schools produce, those who have already proven their proficiency in group instruction methods. It makes sense to continue with a method that works for that selected group of students. Of course, there have always been some student casualties along the way (and there is room for improvement), but the University's teaching methods do work well enough *for them*.

Has it mattered that as we evolved from the junior college into the comprehensive community college that we have continued to teach as we were taught, despite the profound changes occurring as our colleges matured? *Has it mattered* that our curriculum has exploded from its lower division emphasis into a great diversity of technical education, developmental education, and community education? *Has it mattered* that our once small, neat open door for student continuance toward a BA degree now more nearly resembles the huge hangar doors at Moffett Airfield where virtually anyone can and does come in--not just because those doors are open but because public policy has targeted the "new student" for continuance? *Has it mattered* that the financing of our enterprise is rapidly moving, in most parts of the country, from a local decision to a much broader review by a wide spectrum of state and federal interests?

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Of course these things matter. The manner in which we deal with them will be critical to our ability to fulfill our mission--even to what our mission will be. Despite the many criticisms today about our lack of mission and the feeling that we have "lost our way," we know our mission; it is stated clearly enough. We just aren't delivering well enough on it, thus throwing its worth and viability into question. Colleges have many success stories; yet attrition rates are very high. We produce about as many losers as we do winners--if the student's stated goal is our measure of success. Why do we continue to settle for that level of success--especially when there is evidence that it does not need to be that way? I believe it is because of the rampant cognitive dissonance in our colleges. We have rationalized our current behavior and settled for something far less than we could be. We are simply not dealing with the inadequacies of a highly restrictive instructional methodology that does not appropriately address an ever-expanding curriculum and a student body drawn from the general population. Nor do I believe our future lies in a return to a restricted curriculum and more restrictive admissions--we just need to get better at fulfilling the mission that has evolved for us.

Critical Problems of Group Instruction

Fred Keller, the grand old man of PSI (Personalized System of Instruction), recently addressed (in *Psychology Today*) the major problems that cause traditional group instruction to fall short of meeting students' learning needs:

Learning is an individual thing, not a group phenomenon. Individual differences in ability, learning style, and motivation are quite pronounced in a typical classroom, and yet the traditional group method assumes that all students in a given class are much the same.

Students are generally very passive--they sit and listen. But Dewey was right; we learn by doing.

In most lecture halls there seems to be a rule of silence operating. Interaction with live people in the learning environment is important; the existence of bodies in one classroom does not guarantee personal contact or interaction.

Units of instruction are usually far too big. A lot of ground is covered before students find out how they are doing, and rewards for studying are simply too few and far between.

My analysis may sound as though I'm down on group instruction, but I'm not. For those students who are good at it, traditional group instruction is both efficacious and satisfying. Outstanding teaching can be seen any day you step into a community college classroom. But the ability to teach is not in question; the learning under the overwhelming commitment to this particular instructional method is.

Focusing on Learning

In my previous article, I attempted to make the case that community colleges must move ahead vigorously with introducing alternative instructional methodologies. *Customizing* and *individualizing* learning, I argued, would much better fit our diverse student body to our diverse curriculum. We must reduce our entrenched commitment to the lock-step, time-defined group instruction that Pat Cross has criticized for years in favor of a better mix of instructional methods. I went on to explain my belief that introduction of computer and telecommunication technologies offered a great opportunity to make a quantum leap toward that goal of customizing and individualizing. I strongly support that view, but developing alternative learning systems is not simple. We all know that our new tools, as sophisticated and as promising as they appear to be, don't teach. It is our instructional methodology that drives our learning system. Any new methods, whether Information Age technology or not, must increase our ability to customize and individualize.

Finally, I know that John Roueche would add that we need to *personalize* instruction. He has been such a convincing spokesman for more personalization in our teaching that practitioners now heed his words in any methodology we employ.

It is time we connected our excellent teaching to some alternative learning systems so as not to become dependent on one approach as we attempt to create winners out of ordinary people. I hope that *customize, individualize, and personalize* will become three watch words as important to our movement as *open access* has been. I think we will find that our search for excellence demands it!

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